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The Ship of Philosophers

How the Early USSR Dealt with Dissident Intellectuals

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PAUL R. GREGORY

On the morning of September 28, 1922, the German steamer *Oberbuergermeister Hacken* set sail from Petrograd. Its passengers represented the cream of Russian intellectual life—writers, poets, journalists, scientists, and philosophers. The best known of them, philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, strolled the deck wearing a broad hat and galoshes and carrying a thick cane. He and other passengers were given a “Golden Book” to sign to memorialize the famous Russians’ traveling on the ship. On the book’s cover was a picture of baritone Fedor Shaliapin, a passenger on the previous voyage. This “Ship of Philosophers” was carrying Russian intellectuals forever banished from Russia by the Bolsheviks. The secret police, then called the *Ob’edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie* (OGPU, Joint State Political Directorate), had arrested, investigated, and sentenced them as enemies. Most, like Berdiaev, would never see Russia again.

This article is the story of the Bolsheviks’ repression of intellectuals, which began in May 1922 as one of Vladimir Lenin’s last major acts, shortly before a first incapacitating stroke left him partially paralyzed. No longer able to speak after his third stroke in March 1923, Lenin retired from active politics, but his anti-intellectual policies continued unabated. His May 1922 initiative resulted in the exile, imprisonment, and internal banishment of hundreds of leading intellectuals,

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The Independent Review, v. 13, n. 4, Spring 2009, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2009, pp. 485-492.

representative of the “Silver Age” of Russian intellectual life. Under Stalin, the policy continued, but it was applied to much greater numbers of intellectuals and specialists in the late 1920s and even more broadly during the Great Purge from 1937 to 1938.

Lenin is often portrayed sympathetically as a leader who was willing to tolerate open discussion and debate, leading to speculation that the Soviet Union would have developed a more humane form of socialism had he lived. His writings took contradictory positions as he maneuvered the Bolsheviks through the civil war and the New Economic Policy introduced in March 1921. Lenin was consistent, however, with regard to “democratic centralism,” the principle that power should be concentrated in a monopoly Communist Party that was “democratic” only in the sense that it reached its decisions by votes of party leaders after open discussion.

The distinction is stark between Lenin’s democratic centralism, which allows discussion only within the party, and democracy, which allows open discussion among members of society at large, including intellectuals. The story begins with Lenin’s repression of “non-Communist” physicians and then moves to his purge of intellectuals. These purges took place during the “liberal” New Economic Policy period, and they show that the Bolsheviks could not tolerate any type of independent assembly or thinking.

Lenin: Learning How to Purge

Lenin’s repression of anti-Soviet intellectuals was sparked by a letter from the minister of health (since 1918), N. A. Semashko. Lenin then set in motion a purge to be organized by Joseph Stalin, the Cheka, and various top Bolshevik leaders (Khaustov, Naumov, and Plotnikova 2003, 7–12). Semashko, himself a physician, feeling upset by the Congress of Physicians’ “anti-Soviet” attitude, sent the following letter to Lenin on May 23, 1922:

To Comrade Lenin and Members of the Politburo: Respected comrades. The recent All-Russian Conference of Physicians took such a significant and dangerous turn that I consider it necessary to inform you about tactics being used with success by Kadets, Monarchists, and Social Revolutionaries [three opposition parties]. My information suggests this tendency is wide-spread not only among doctors but among other specialists (agronomists, engineers, technicians and lawyers). Even responsible persons do not recognize the danger.

What went on at the Congress can be summarized as follows: 1. A movement against Soviet medicine, 2. The demand for “freely” elected officials and grassroots independent organizations (an exact resolution of the Congress) according to formulations advanced by Kadets, Monarchists, and Social Revolutionaries, 3. A clear intent to remain outside the

professional worker movement, and, 4. An intent to organize independent publishing organizations.¹

Semasko proposed limiting the independence of professional organizations, banning independent publishing, and imposing an obligation to practice “Soviet” medicine. He ended his letter: “The removal of those Monarchist and Social Revolutionary doctors [whom he named] making presentations from positions of leadership should be agreed with the OGPU.” In other words, the secret police were to deal with the offending “anti-Soviet” physicians.

Lenin directed the letter to Stalin, who, in his position as general secretary of the Central Committee, submitted it to the Politburo. Lenin’s handwritten “question” for the Politburo reads: “Comrade Stalin. I believe it necessary to show this letter to [Feliks] Dzerzhinsky [the head of the OGPU] with extreme secrecy (no copies) and to all members of the Politburo and to prepare a directive: ‘To direct Dzerzhinsky OGPU to work out measures with the assistance of Semashko and to report to the Politburo (two week deadline?).’”

Stalin submitted Lenin’s proposal to deal with the unruly physicians for a Politburo vote (for repression of physicians) on the same day. The proposal, which opened the door for the suppression of any type of independent thinking or inquiry, received approval from all Politburo members (Stalin, Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, Aleksei Rykov, and V. M. Molotov), except for the handwritten abstention from Mikhail Tomsky (the trade union head): “I withhold my vote because the issue of the Congress of Physicians needs to be presented in a different framework. We are guilty ourselves for much of this and Semashko is the most guilty.”

Following the Politburo decree, Dzerzhinsky submitted to the Politburo (within the required two-week period) his OGPU report *About Anti-Soviet Groupings among the Intelligentsia*, which identified a wide range of “anti-Soviet activities in professional organizations, universities, scientific societies, administrative conferences, and in trusts, cooperatives, and trade organizations.”

On the basis of Dzerzhinsky’s report, the Politburo issued on June 8, 1922, the “Decree about Anti-Soviet Groupings among the Intelligentsia,” which called for “filtering” incoming university students, with strict limits placed on nonproletarians and checks of political reliability, restrictions of meetings of students and of professors, and bans on independent publishing activities. The OGPU, the personnel administrations of the Ministry of Higher Education, and the political department of the state publishing office were to carry out these checks.

The decree created a special “conference” composed of representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Justice Department empowered “to exile abroad

1. Specific details and quotations in this section come from Khaustov, Naumov, and Plotnikova 2003, 36–58 and 60–63, my translations.

or to points within Russia, if a more stern punishment is not required.” A commission composed of a Politburo member (Lev Kamenev), a ranking OGPU official (Iosif Unshlikht), and a high official of the revolutionary-military tribunal (Dmitry Kursky) was to do the final review of the list of leaders of hostile intellectual groups to be punished and the list of publishing operations to be closed.

What started as an operation against “non-Communist” physicians broadened into a general witch hunt against intellectuals and professionals.

The Politburo received the list of offending physicians on June 22. On July 20, the special conference submitted the names of anti-Soviet intellectuals, but the Politburo declared its work “unsatisfactory because of the small size of the list and insufficient substantiation.” On the same day, Stalin received an urgent request from the OGPU to speed things up because word of impending arrests was circulating both inside the country and in émigré circles. The OGPU representative submitted a list of 186 names of anti-Soviet intellectuals on August 2, 1922, apparently based on a selection committee meeting on July 22. These nearly two hundred intellectuals were scheduled for arrest and then deportation.

The list of 186 doctors, engineers, professors, and literary figures does not follow a uniform format. The most complete cases give the name and address, the charge, and the commission’s vote, often based on the recommendation of the personnel department of the organization for which the person worked. In most cases, the sentence was exile abroad, although some persons, in particular physicians, were exiled to remote regions where they were to practice medicine. In some cases, the commission decided that the person represented no danger and therefore did not schedule him for punishment, but his name would remain on the list anyway (“The commission is against exile because he is harmless”). With these few exceptions, the listed individuals were scheduled for internal or external exile. Among the names were:

No. 23. Abrikosov, V. V.: A priest of the Roman Catholic Church in Moscow. The son of the owner of a confectionary factory. The initiator of illegal meetings of Catholics in his home for the unification of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. A close friend of the Patriarch Tikhon and the head of the Catholic congregation in Petrograd. Carry out a search and arrest and send him abroad. He lives [at] Perechistechsky Boulevard House 29, Apartment 3.

No. 9. Zamiatin, E. I. A concealed white guardist. Author of an illegal resolution, which he presented at the House of Literature, in which he defamed Andrei Bely for his defense of the fatherland. He is fully against Soviet power in his writings. He is a close colleague of the enemy Remizov, who has already fled. Remizov is a known enemy and Zamiatin is as well. If he is sent abroad, he could become a dangerous leader. It is necessary to send him to Novgorod or Kursk; in no case can he be sent abroad.

No. 31. Kondrat'ev, N. D. Professor. Noted and close collaborator of [the] "Journal of Agricultural Economics"—an organ of anti-Soviet agronomists. A Social Revolutionary involved in the case of the "Tactical Center." Sentenced to death for participation in the "Union of Rebirth." Death sentence changed to prison. Maintains ties with Social Revolutionaries although he officially left the party. Arrest and exile abroad. The entire commission is in favor.

Eight days later, on August 10, the Politburo accepted the list and ordered the OGPU to arrest the most dangerous persons and to place the others under house arrest. On August 22, the ever-accurate OGPU submitted a budget to Stalin for the projected cost of exiling 217 persons abroad. On August 22 and again on August 26, 1922, the OGPU sent Stalin reports on the progress of the exile campaign, with statistics on arrests, exiles, and numbers held in prisons, subject to house arrest, or released on their own recognizance after agreeing to pay the cost of exile.

Not all the sentences were carried out. Kondrat'ev was held in a prison instead of being sent abroad. According to OGPU reports, of the sixty-seven Moscow intellectuals scheduled for exile, twelve were under house arrest, fourteen were in prisons, six had not been arrested, and twenty-one were at large on their own recognizance after agreeing to pay their own travel expenses. The most active and dangerous intellectuals were exiled in convoys of six.

Berdiaev

The most famous person on the list of 186 was Nikolai Berdiaev, the world-renowned philosopher of mystic non-Orthodox Christianity and critical philosophy, an opponent of the close link between church and state under the czars. The charge against him and the suggested sentence read: "No. 55. Berdiaev, N. A. Close to the publishing house 'Bereg.' He is being investigated as part of the cases 'Tactical Center' and the 'Union of Rebirth.' A monarchist and a Kadet of the rightist persuasion. A member of the Black Hundred, inclined to religion, taking part in the religious counter revolution. Ionov and Poliansky are for internal exile. The Commission with the participation of Bogdanov and others is for foreign exile."² Berdiaev's story, reconstructed from his case file, is representative of what happened to the other 185 intellectuals.

Although in the early days of Soviet power Berdiaev was allowed to continue teaching at Moscow University and to gather intellectuals in his Free Academy of Religious Culture, he was watched closely by the secret police. On February 18, he was forced to haul scrap metal in freezing weather. After one day of work, however,

2. Details and quotations in this section come from Shetalinsky 1998, my translations.

he was arrested. His apartment was thoroughly searched, and his manuscripts and correspondence confiscated, although he freely admitted to the arresting officer that he was an “ideological opponent of the idealization of communism.” Berdiaev’s arrest was based on information (the informant got his name wrong) that he was a member of the “Council of Social Activists.”

Berdiaev’s imprisonment ended after a nocturnal interrogation by none other than the OGPU head Dzerzhinsky, his deputy Vyachaslav Menzhinsky, and Politburo member Kamenev. In his memoirs, Berdiaev described Dzerzhinsky: “He gave the impression of a dedicated and honest person. He was a fanatic. There was something terrifying about him. Earlier he wanted to be a Catholic monk but he transferred his fanaticism to communism.” After a lengthy conversation, Dzerzhinsky told him that he was free to go but could not leave Moscow without permission.

On August 16, Berdiaev was awakened by the OGPU’s knock on his Moscow apartment door. The OGPU detachment searched his apartment from 1:00 A.M. to 5:00 A.M. and then took him to its Lubianka headquarters. In the interrogations of him, Berdiaev did not hide his antipathy to communism: “Any class organization or party should be subordinated to the individual and to humanity.” And “[n]o party past or present arouses any sympathy in me.” The OGPU’s verdict: exile abroad for anti-Soviet activity. Berdiaev refused to sign a confession, stating: “I do not declare myself guilty of engaging in anti-Soviet activity and I particularly do not regard myself as guilty of engaging in counter-revolutionary activity during a period of military difficulties for Russia.” After rejection of his protest of the verdict, he was forced to sign a pledge that he would not return to Russia without permission and would pay the cost of his travel. Within a month, he was sailing to Germany on the “Ship of Philosophers.” He died in Paris in 1948, a world-renowned philosopher and historian whose major works were translated into many languages.

The Less Fortunate

The passengers on the Ship of Philosophers did not know so at the time, but they could consider themselves fortunate. Many intellectuals remaining in Russia who refused to kowtow to the party were eventually imprisoned in the Solovetsky Camp of Special Designation, which housed political prisoners primarily. Located on a remote northern island, the Solovetsky Camp was noted for its cruelty and harsh conditions.

When the Great Purge began in 1937, the Solovetsky Camp received an execution “limit” of 1,200 prisoners, but the ambitious camp commander executed 1,615, most of them political prisoners. Lists of victims were prepared from inmate records and informers’ reports. The Solovetsky commander, upon receiving approval of his execution protocols, executed two echelons (1,116 and 509) in October and November 1937.

An eyewitness account describes the departure of the second echelon, which marched in columns of four through the archway to the wharves: “There I saw the face of Professor Florensky, there was white-bearded Professor Litvinov, holding his head high. There was Kotliarevsky (in a new leather cap) and Vanegengaim (in a black coat and a deerskin shirt). They see me and nod; their hands are occupied with their bags. Kotliarevsky tries unsuccessfully to smile. . . . More than a thousand were taken away that evening. . . . [L]ater there were terrible rumors that they had all been drowned” (Brodsky 2002, 472).

The executions were duly reported to Moscow: “To Major Garin, Deputy Department Head NKVD: I hereby report that, on the basis of the order signed by the head of the administration of the NKVD, Commissar Zakovsky of October 16, 1937 No. 189852 for the ‘highest measure of punishment’ according to protocols No. 81, 82, 83, 84, and 85—1,116 persons have been executed. Signed: Capitan State Security, Matveev, November 10, 1937” (qtd. in Brodsky 2002, 474).

Independent Organizations and Independent Thinkers

The first purge of intellectuals and other “anti-Soviet” thinkers set up a formal machinery for identifying those who did not agree with the Bolshevik regime. A special conference was established that could recommend for jail or exile anyone viewed as exhibiting signs of dissent or unlike thinking. The conference worked on the basis of employer records and recommendations, which meant that persons on poor terms with their colleagues or employers might be singled out. Those arrested had no legal recourse. Their only review was by a committee headed by a Politburo member and an OGPU official.

Intellectuals were an early target of Bolshevik repression for fear that they would present an alternative view of reality, different from the “truth” enunciated in the official party line. The only real truth with respect to politics, economy, arts, and literature was supposed to be that enunciated by the party. “Soviet” artists, physicians, scientists, and poets were those who accepted the infinite wisdom of the party line. Anti-Soviet intellectuals were those who disagreed with it. Kondrat’ev, for example, was an economist-statistician who spent his career collecting economic data and relating what he believed these statistics had to say about the way the economy actually worked. Berdiaev believed in the individual’s superiority to any party or state. The writer Zamiatin was able to write allegories that might be critical of the Soviet system, but party authorities could not know for sure. Such intellectuals posed a formidable threat to the Soviet regime because their version of the truth differed from the party’s version.

Soviet fear of and hostility toward intellectuals continued until the end of the Soviet regime. The longest-serving state-security chief, Yury Andropov, who headed the KGB from 1967 to 1982, was the party’s chief warrior in its battle against intellectuals such as Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Andropov’s

methods were the same as Dzerzhinsky's—internal and foreign exile, harassment, use of compromising materials—anything to neutralize the suspects' influence on Soviet society (Soroka 2001, see entries under “Andropov”).

Intellectual dissidents are the nemeses of all dictators, not only those of the Soviet Union but those elsewhere in the world: Aung Gyi in Myanmar, Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia, Wang Dan and Liu Nianchun in China. Idi Amin bombed entire villages to destroy a single political opponent. The dictators' fear of intellectuals, journalists, and religious figures is well founded:

Since 1980, dictatorships have collapsed before the predominantly nonviolent defiance of people in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Slovenia, Madagascar, Mali, Bolivia, and the Philippines. Nonviolent resistance has furthered the movement toward democratization in Nepal, Zambia, South Korea. Chile, Argentina, Haiti, Brazil, Uruguay, Malawi, Thailand, Bulgaria, Hungary, Zaire, Nigeria and various parts of the former Soviet Union (playing a significant role in the defeat of the August 1991 attempted hard-line coup d'état). (Sharp 1993, 1)

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Acknowledgments: This article draws on a chapter in Paul Gregory's book *Lenin's Brain and Other Tales from the Secret Soviet Archives* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2008). The publisher's permission to use this material here is gratefully acknowledged.